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## **Seven Stress Management Tips to Live a Quality-Driven Life**

*by Stephanie Marston, MFT*

### **Stress Management Tip #1: Remember What's Important. Define Your Priorities and Adjust Your Schedule to Reflect Your Values.**

No matter how frantic life gets, no matter how much frenzy seems to be present, the truly successful people are able to rise above the pandemonium and maintain their perspective. They can do this because they know what's important. Their values are their compass--they keep them on course regardless of the chaos and confusion of life. These people maintain a vision of what truly matters, what their life is about and what they want it to be.

Make conscious choices about how you invest your time and energy. The solution to creating greater balance in your life is selectivity--it's about choosing. It's not about getting more done, but being more selective about what you do. It's about choosing quality rather than quantity. Life balance is discovering how to give more to your self. It's about doing what matters and to devoting less of yourself to what doesn't. That is our challenge. The solution lies not in the balance of our abilities, but in our ability to balance.

#### **What You Can Do:**

Ask yourself: What do I value? What's most important to me? What do I really want? What do I need to change in order to have my values expressed more visibly in my everyday life? Is there anything I need to add to my life? Are there activities or commitments I need to eliminate?

It's actually less important to understand the meaning of life than it is to understand the meaning of your life.

### **Stress Management Tip #2: Get Real About What You Can Actually Expect of Yourself**

Most of us are caught in a tug-of-war between who we think we should be and who we are; between what we want to do and what we're actually able to do. Our feelings of guilt often prevent us from taking care of ourselves. These feelings often stem from unrealistic expectations. Ignore your own needs long enough, and I guarantee, sooner or later Godzilla will emerge wreaking havoc and suffering on you, your entire family, friends and co-workers.

Guilt is a major roadblock to taking care of yourself. There's always a list of things that have to be done that take precedence over attending to your needs. Then there's the fear of who you'll disappoint if you occasionally make yourself a priority. But stop and consider for a moment that when you put yourself last on the list and allow guilt to run your life the person who you continually disappoint is yourself.

**What You Can Do:**

Don't worry, there is something you can do—in fact, you must do. Most of you have an idealized image of what good parents, good employees, good sons/daughters, good husbands/wives should be, and are haunted by these images of perfection. Rather than confront the comparison between the idealized images and your actual self, many of you feel inadequate and guilt-ridden because you can't match up to your own impossibly high standards.

You have a choice, you can either adjust your standards so that they more closely match reality or you can change your behavior. In the majority of cases, I would suggest you get rid of those ludicrous expectations.

**Stress Management Tip #3: Set Limits so that You Can Better Balance the Competing Demands in Your Everyday Life.**

We suffer under project and productivity overload at work taking on more than we can comfortably deliver in our desire to get ahead, impress people and live up to other's expectations. Meanwhile our top priorities go unattended to. You have to learn to say no to the things that don't matter so that you can invest yourself more fully in those things that do. Saying no is a way of caring for and honoring ourselves.

**What You Can Do:**

Most of us pressure ourselves to give an immediate response when asked a question. But if truth be told, very few things require an immediate answer. Why not say, "let me get back to you," and take the time you need to decide if this is really right for you or if you're being seduced by the "I can do it all syndrome?" Remember you have every right to say no to something you don't want to do.

**Stress Management Tip #4: Build Stronger Relationships.**

Because of the fast pace of our world and our lives we get into the habit of not communicating well about our feelings and needs. Many of us measure ourselves more and more by the quantity of our achievements rather than by the quality of our relationships. When you approach the end of your life what will be your most cherished memories? Will it be how successful you were on the job? How much money you had in the bank? The size of the house you lived in, or the kind of car you drove? Most likely not. What each of us wants is to remember and be remembered for how much love we shared in our life. We want to leave this earth knowing that we touched other people and allowed ourselves to have deep, meaningful relationships. These are the things that truly matter.

**What You Can Do:**

It would be helpful if you set aside a few minutes at the end of each week to consider three vital areas of your life, your family, yourself and work and to create a schedule for the week ahead. Ask yourself, what can I do that is meaningful for each of these three areas during the week ahead? How can each of the three be more balanced and work for rather than against the other two?

Remember to reserve relationship time. Make a weekly date with your spouse, without your children and also schedule family time, a Sunday dinner, a regular bedtime ritual, or a family activity. And make that time sacred.

**Stress Management Tip #5: Recognize and Acknowledge Your Strengths.**

The vast majority of us think that through criticism or judgment we can shame ourselves into being different. But this rarely works. Most people don't respond well to disparagement, in fact they usually become defensive and resistant. We're no different. In order to make the changes necessary to create the life you want, you have to shift your position from focusing on your flaws and shortcomings to recognizing your strengths, talents and positive qualities. You have to create a foundation of love and support.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that you become a Pollyanna, but that you have a balanced, compassionate view of yourself. Everything you've done, everyone you've loved, every mistake you've made, every obstacle overcome, is part of the person you are today.

Change occurs most readily from a foundation of acceptance and support. A committed, nurturing relationship with yourself is essential. The only way you will create a life you love is one caring, compassionate act at a time. You have to love and appreciate yourself into wholeness. You need to be there for yourself if you're going to change the things in your life that are robbing you of living your best life.

**What You Can Do:**

Consider: What are three things you've accomplished in your life that you're most proud of?

What are five of my strengths, talents, and positive qualities? (Yes, you do have them. If you spend a little time you'll find that there are far more than five.)

How do I use my gifts and strengths in everyday life?

Are there ways in which I could make better use of my resources?

**Stress Management Tip #6: Ask, Ask, Ask.**

History is filled with examples of incredible benefits people have received simply by asking for them. Yet, surprisingly, asking, one of the most powerful tool for life balance—is still a challenge that hold many people back. If you're like most people, you may be holding yourself back by not asking for information, assistance, support and the time you need to fulfill your dreams and goals. While there's no guarantee that other people will cooperate with your requests, at least you've put your wish and desire out

there to be considered. Ask for what you want and need. You'll be amazed at how often you get a positive response.

### **What You Can Do:**

Ask your spouse to take the kids to the park so you can have some time to yourself. Ask for a day off from work. Ask your children to clean up their toys or their rooms. Ask the person sitting next to an open seat at the movies if they would move down so you and your spouse or friend can sit together. But whatever you do, ask, ask, ask.

### **Stress Management Tip #7: Put Yourself At the Top of Your "To Do" List**

The truth is, you have to come first, at least some of the time. The reality is that it's only to the extent that you love and care for yourself that you're truly able to love and care for others. Actually scheduling self-nurturing activities is a way to trick your guilt demons. When you schedule personal time for yourself, you make it legitimate. The reality is that your health and well-being may be in jeopardy if you're neglecting yourself. If you're running on empty you're not doing anyone any good, least of all yourself.

Taking care of yourself isn't a reward for completing your "to do list." It's a function of the fact that you're a human being and deserve nurturing every single day. Caring for yourself is your birthright, have the courage to claim it.

### **What You Can Do:**

Schedule self-nurturing activities as a way to trick your guilt demons. When you schedule personal time for yourself you make it legitimate.

Take a mini-vacation. We all need a break from our busy lives. I know, there's so much to do, you couldn't possibly take time just for yourself. But let's put things in perspective. There is very little in life that requires your immediate attention. You may think that it does, but with rare exceptions, most things can wait until tomorrow. In other words, take time for yourself. You need it and more importantly you deserve it.

To begin with, start small, do what feels manageable, a lunch date with a friend, a massage, an afternoon at the movies, a walk in the woods, spend part of a day under the covers, napping or watching your favorite movie, make a date to play racket ball. The possibilities are endless. The essential ingredient is that you tune in to what it means for you to care for yourself.

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